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Georgia Owner of Day Care Business Is National Small Business Person of the Year

Massachusetts, Vermont, Washington State Winners are Runners-Up

ORLANDO, Fla. – Sheree W. Mitchell, who opened her first Columbus, Georgia-based day care center from scratch with the help of a U.S. Small Business Administration-backed loan in 1989, and has grown her business into a \$5 million per year enterprise, was named *National Small Business Person of the Year* during ceremonies today at SBA Expo '04, the agency's three-day conference celebrating National Small Business Week.

“One of the beautiful things about small business is that a go-go entrepreneur like Sheree Mitchell can see an opportunity and seize it, and build a successful enterprise from scratch,” SBA Administrator Hector V. Barreto said. “It’s not always getting into what’s hot, or what’s new and technologically innovative; sometimes it’s recognizing a niche that isn’t being served. Small business success happens when entrepreneurs like Ms. Mitchell identify a need and fill that need with a great product or service.”

The announcement was made at today’s National Awards Luncheon, co-sponsored by Sam’s Club.



Sheree Mitchell, National Small Business Person of the Year, with SBA Administrator Hector V. Barreto at Expo '04 in Orlando. Mitchell is a recognized expert in the child-care sector and has built her operations in Columbus, Ga., into a multi-million dollar enterprise

Mitchell and her company, Growing Room, Inc., care for more than 850 children, and employ more than 170 people in five centers in the Columbus area, including three operated on-site at large local employers. A recognized expert in the industry, Mitchell is the 41st annual National Small Business Person of the Year. She was selected from among the state Small Business Persons of the Year representing the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Guam.

Mitchell began Growing Room, Inc. in 1989 when she used an SBA 504 development loan to build her first child development center in Columbus. She added 20 employees during the next two years as the center filled and a waiting list developed. By 1992, Mitchell realized that she needed more space and built a \$400,000 addition, adding 12 more to her staff to handle the expanding business.

In 1996, a second Growing Room opened in North Columbus in a newly constructed 11,500 square-foot facility, creating 32 new jobs. Three years later, she obtained a contract for the Columbus Regional Healthcare Systems' on-site childcare center, adding 15 more employees. In 2002, Growing Room was awarded the contract for two on-site childcare centers at the headquarters of Columbus based AFLAC.

A registered nurse, Mitchell is active in community affairs, including the local Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club, United Way and Girl Scouts organizations. She is active as a scholarship fund-raiser for Columbus State University, and has served on the Pre-K Peer Review Committee of the Office of School Readiness, the state regulatory body for childcare in Georgia.

The first runner-up this year in the national competition is Larry O'Toole, president and founder of Gentle Giant Moving Co., Inc., of Somerville, Mass., who started his company with a borrowed truck and a \$17 newspaper ad. The two second runners-up are Rocky Wens, president of ESP, Inc., of Lynnwood, Wash., an engineering firm that has become an active defense contractor, and Steve Birge and Mark Curran, the owners of Black River Produce of Proctorsville, Vt., who built a \$27 million produce company from a storefront retail market.

O'Toole's Gentle Giant Moving Co. has been recognized as the best moving company in the Boston area. From that borrowed truck and newspaper ad, O'Toole has built the company into a \$16 million-a-year 185-employee business, hiring college-educated athletes from local universities, including several Olympians, to deliver on his promise of a safe, gentle, effective, hassle-free move. He credits an SBA-backed loan for \$843,000 in 1998 for helping him expand his facilities, allowing him to grow the company by 60 percent.

Wens, an immigrant from the Netherlands, created an engineering services firm that employs more than 300 people at 38 sites in 17 states and in Okinawa, Japan. By assembling a team of highly skilled management, engineering, technical and administrative service professionals, Wens has developed a remarkable niche in an industry that is dominated by large Fortune 500 defense contractors. In 1998, he expanded his small drafting firm by broadening his focus and pursuing and winning government engineering, operation, and maintenance contracts. A certified 8(a) company in the SBA's Business Development program, ESP's contracts to operate and maintain the most sophisticated military simulators and trainers throughout the U.S. and in Japan account for about 95 percent of the firm's revenue.

Birge got the idea to start a produce company in 1978 when he saw the poor quality of the produce accepted at the restaurant where he worked, and decided he could do a better job. He met Curran soon after while hitchhiking, and the two joined forces and started working with local farmers for the freshest produce available. They now manage a produce distribution company with sales of more than \$27 million a year, a work force of 100 employees and a fleet of 30 refrigerated trucks and two tractor trailers. Their product line includes fruits and vegetables, seafood, shell fish, plants, trees, shrubs, wreaths, natural foods and juices. Their clients include grocery stores, schools, restaurants, camps, ski areas, hospitals, nursing homes and farm stands.

The national small business awards are a highlight of SBA Expo '04, the agency's annual celebration honoring the nation's leading small business entrepreneurs, co-sponsored by SCORE, "Counselors to America's Small Business."

The winners are selected on their record of stability, growth in employment and sales, financial condition, innovation, response to adversity, and community service. For more information on these companies and on the rest of the state Small Business Person of the Year award winners, visit the SBA Web site at <http://app1.sba.gov/sbsuccess/2004/index.cfm>.

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